

## Message Text

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ACTION ARA-06

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FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3839  
INFO PANCANAL  
CINCSO

CONFIDENTIAL PANAMA 6933

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS  
TAGS: PINT, PN  
SUBJECT: PLEBISCITE CAPAIGN MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO RETURN TO  
POLITICAL STATUS QUO ANTE

REF: PANAMA 6932 AND PREVIOUS

1. THE TORRIJOS GOVERNMENT HAS CLEARLY MADE A DECISION TO PERMIT AN OPEN DEBATE ON THE MERITS OF THE TREATY. POLITICAL PARTIES--LONG IN HIBERNATION AND STILL NOT LEGALIZED-- HAVE COME OUT OF THE WOODWORK, HELD WELL-PUBLICIZED PUBLIC MEETINGS, APPOINTED COMMITTEES TO SUTDY THE INTRICACIES OF THE TREATY, AND CALLED THE GOVERNMENT SOME PRETTY BAD NAMES. )3\*5-WING STUDENTS HAVE BEEN GIVEN SPACE IN THE GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED PRESS TO ZAP THE TREATY AND THE GOVERNMENT WHICH SIGNED IT. THE "INDEPENDENT LAWYERS" HAVE HAD THEIR LONG AND PONDEROUS DISQUISITIONS ON THE TREAT'S INQUITIES PUBLISHED IN THE PRESS. FLYERS AND POSTERS HAVE SHOWN UP AROUND TOWN, EACH WITH ITS SPECIAL (USUALLY ANTI-TREATY) MESSAGE. AFTER AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN SECONDARY STUDENTS AND POLICE IN WHICH A NUMBER OF ARRESTS WERE MADE SEPTEMBER 7 STUDENTS HAVE BEEN ALLOWED TO DEMONSTRATE PEACEFULLY AGAINST THE TREATY AND OTHER  
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GOVERNMENT POLICIES. PROMISES HAVE BEEN MADE THAT MANY POLITICAL EXILES WILL BE PERMITTED TO RETURN (THOUGH TORRIJOS WILL TO FOLLOW UP ON THIS IS OPEN TO QUESTION; SEE REFTEL)

2. THERE CAN BE LITTLE DOUBT THAT THIS SURGE OF FREE AND OPEN DISCUSSION IS A DIRECT RESULT OF THE TREATY RATIFICATION PROCESS. TORRIJOS IS CONFIDENT THAT, EVEN WITH FREE DISCUSSION,

THE VOTERS WILL OVERWHELMINGLY APPROVE THE TREATY. HE CAN CONVINCE THE WORLD THAT THE PLEBISCITE IS A GENUINE EXPRESSION OF PANAMANIAN OPINION ONLY TO THE EXTENT THAT IT IS JUST THAT. BUT THE INTERESTING QUESTION IS, WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE PLEBISCITE?

3. PANAMANIAN ARE ACCUSTOMED TO A MODICUM OF FREE DISCUSSION. BUT, UNTIL RECENTLY, CERTAIN TABOOS WERE FAIRLY REGIDLY OBSERVED; ESPECIALLY IN THE PRESS TORRIJOS COULD NOT BE ATTACKED; ANY CRITISM OF THE TREATY WHICH HIS GOVERNMENT WAS NEGOTIATING HAD TO BE HANDLED WITH KID GLOVES; AND NO ONE COULD QUESTION THE LEGITIMACY OF TH REGIME OR CALL FOR A RETURN TO A PARTY-BASED DEMOCRACY. WITH INCREASING FREQUENCY THESE TABOOS ARE BEING BROKEN IN THE CONTEST OF THE PRE-PLEBISCITE CAMPAING.

4. WILL TORRIJOS TRY TO PUT THE GENIE BACK IN THE BOTTLE AFTER THE PLEBISCITE? OR PERHAPS HE WILL WAIT UNTIL AFTER THE U.S. SENATE VOTES ON THE TREATY, IN VIEW OF AMERICAN SENSIBILITIES ABOUT RESTRAINTS ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION. IF HE DOES CRACK DOWN, CAN HE AVOID THE PROSPECT OF MORE EXILES OR OTHER FORMS OF REPRESSION? IF HE DOES NOT CRACK DOWN, CAN HE AVOID THE GROTH OF A ACTIVE AND EFFECTIVE OPPOSITION, WITH A CONCOMITANT THREAT TO HIS REGIME?

5. NONE OF THESE QUESTIONS HAS A READY ANSWER. BUT THEY ARE CONFIDENTIAL

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BEING ASKED WITH INCREASING FREQUENCY BY POLITICAL-MINDED PANAMANIAN. ABOUT ALL THAT CAN BE SAID WITH MUCH ASSURANCE IS THAT TORRIJOS IS ACTING LIKE A MAN WHO IS POLITACALLY CONFIDENT. HIS DISLIKE OF PARTIES AND THE TRADITIONAL FORMS OF DEMOCRACY AS THEY HAVE FUNCTIONED (OR MALFUNCTIONED) IN PANAMA SEEMS TO BE REAL. BUT HE DOES NOT APPEAR TO HAVE MUCH FEAR THAT THE PARTIES AND OTHER ANTI-GOVERNMENT CLUSTERS HAVE A GREAT DEAL OF POLITICAL PUNCH. OUR GUESS IS THAT THE PARTIES AND OTHER POLITICAL CRITICS OF THE REGIME WILL NOT JUST SHUT UP WHEN THE TREATY CAMPAIGN IS OVER. AT THAT POINT? TORRIJOS WILL HAVE TO DECIDE WHETHER TO ALLOW HIS GOVERNMENT TO BECOME MORE LIBERAL.

JORDEN

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## Message Attributes

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**To:** STATE  
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